Bernard H. Mehlman Transcript

Bernard Mehlman: I went to Washington, DC, in the summer of 1967. I went to Washington [in] the summer of ‘67. All through the very end of the ‘60s, but certainly in the ‘70s – I can't swear about those two, three years in the 60s – I was part of a daily vigil at the Soviet embassy. I don't know if you know about that. But the Jewish community organized in such a fashion in those days that all kinds of Jewish organizations, synagogues, congregational schools, and the like took a day. At noon every day, there was a Jewish presence outside, within the limits that are prescribed; you can't get so close to an embassy. There are certain laws about the protection of an embassy because it's technically foreign territory. So you can't stand on their property. But within whatever the limit was, there was a Jewish presence on the street from 1960-something – I can't swear the date of that. I know I certainly started by the ‘70s, early ’70. My congregation was there. We had Friday; we were there every Friday. Members of the congregation who worked in the city near the embassy would join together, and we had placards, whether it was on behalf of a family or an individual or the subject in general. I did that until I left, until February of – so every Friday, winter, summer, fall/autumn, there was somebody there every single day.

Aaron Hersh: May I ask you to remind me which congregation you served that you were with?

BM: I was at Temple Micah, which was in the southwest part of Washington. But all the congregations – there were congregations in Northern Virginia, there were congregations in Maryland, there were congregations in the district. Everybody had a day. It was always at noon. Every day at noon, there was a Jewish presence within the yardage of the embassy. So that's when I got started with Soviet Jewry, in 1968, 1969. I got there in ’67, right after the –

Tamar Shachaf Schneider: Six-Day War?

BM: Six-Day War. I moved there in July of ‘67.

TSS: Was it influenced by the Six-Day War?

BM: No, no. It was already in existence when I moved to Washington, I think. I can't give you that data. I wasn't there. Then I came to Boston in February of 1978. I've been here since.

Gabriel Weinstein: Did you know about the Soviet Jewry movement before you got to Temple Micah?

BM: Of course. The Jewish community, both secular and religious, had that on the –

TSS: Agenda?

BM: – screen, so to speak. So you got it a lot internally. I'm a Reform rabbi. So got it a lot through the organizations of the Reform Movement, and then we got it from American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress – you name it. Then there were independent groups. There was definitely independent groups. Some of them were just on behalf of Soviet Jewry as an umbrella subject, and then there were people who took up the causes of individuals, as well. So you might have a group that was working for [Natan] Sharansky in the early days. You had a group working for *Shavei Tzion* [Returners to Zion], it's called, those who are applying to go to Israel. I would make a distinction between those who are truly *Shavei Tzion*; they were really Zionists and wanted to go to Israel. There were those who were not. They were not anti-Zionist, but they weren't Zionists. They just wanted to get out. They just wanted to get out, and they said whatever they could say or should say to say that that was the reason they were going; they wanted to go back to the ancestral homeland, that whole shtick. But they, in fact, really didn't want to. There was that group also. They wanted to go to the United

States, or they wanted to go to Canada, or they wanted to go to some Western European country. This was before Germany came into the focus. Germany was a much later phenomenon. They wanted to go to Britain. In Boston, there is a group that was called –

GW: Action for Soviet Jewry?

BM: Action for Soviet Jewry. The eighteen – whatever the number was – that was the British version of that. [Editor's Note: Rabbi Mehlman may be referring to The 35's, the Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry.]

GW: Yeah. So when you came here to Boston, to Temple Israel in 1978, what was the movement in the Boston area like for Soviet Jewry?

BM: There was Action for Soviet Jewry; the Jewish Community Council; the various rabbinic organizations, [phone ringing] which means the Reform group, the Conservative, you know Jews – two Jews, four opinions, right? So there were all these different groups … That's a Ph.D. student at Brandeis.

TSS: Who?

BM: He's defending his thesis on the ninth of December.

TSS: He's in the NEJS [Editor's Note: pronounced "Nedjes," Near Eastern and Judaic Studies] department?

BM: Yes.

TSS: What's his name?

BM: Jeremy Morrison. You wouldn't know him.

TSS: Rabbi?

BM: He’s a rabbi.

GW: We’re going to interview him.

AH: Yes, we’re interviewing him as well.

TSS: We’re interviewing him as well.

BM: I took him to the Soviet Union when he was sixteen years old.

TSS: That’s funny.

GW: Last night, we were doing some research, and we were looking for –

BM: Do you want me to tell him to come earlier?

GW: I think we're going to do him by himself. But we were looking through old issues of the *Jewish Advocate*[weekly Jewish newspaper published in Boston, Massachusetts from 1902-2020]. We came across a trip report from that trip that you took him on when he was sixteen. The title was like, “Everything's Gray in the Soviet Union” or something like that. But going back to what we were talking about what the Soviet Jewry scene was like, what was Temple Israel's involvement like with the Soviet Jewry movement when you came in?

BM: To begin with, I’d have to look at dates. I’d have to look at dates. So I don't want to – I'm very poor at dates, to begin with. So I'm very not trustworthy.

TSS: You’re not a historian.

BM: I wouldn’t say exactly that, but I'm not good with numbers in general. So I'm not good with dates. I have a very keen memory, but I don't have a good keen memory for numbers. When I came here, there were these various organizations I mentioned to you, and then there were the rabbinic organizations, the Orthodox, the Conservative, [and] the

Reform. More or less – she's still alive. Judy [Patkin] – at Action [for Post-Soviet Jewry]. Have you met her?

GW: No.

BM: She's key to the story.

AH: No.

TSS: Maybe the second group. We're six students in the class.

GW: I'm pretty sure the other group is...

TSS: So they divided –

BM: I see. I got it.

AH: I think I've heard her name with the other group.

BM: The other woman died. Actually, Judy was older, but the younger woman actually died. But Judy is still around, and she's running, I still think, Action for Post-Soviet Jewry. She's doing a lot of stuff in Ukraine, in Dnepropetrovsk.

GW: Dnepropetrovsk. I can't pronounce it.

BM: So there were all these organizations doing some little thing. Okay? Then there was this umbrella and the JCC [Jewish Community Center]. Those were sort of the community – and every so often, the American Jewish Committee would put a finger into the water and pull it out. The American Jewish Congress would put a finger in the water and pull it out. When people like Sharansky began to boom on the stage, then everybody "woah," [laughter] everybody got revved up. Sharansky, upon arriving in the United States, came to Boston and spoke at our synagogue, and we had a full auditorium – thousand, twelve hundred people – just after his arrival. I have probably got – down on

the bottom there if somebody wants to use them – I don't know that I want to let them out of here – but if you want to arrange a time to come and go through – that's all the temple bulletins during my term of service.

TSS: Maybe everything is online.

BM: This stuff is before online time. It could be. I simply don't know. Inside the Reform movement, there was a group called the Northeast Region of Reform Rabbis. I came in ’78; this was already established when I came. So, again, I can't tell you when it began. But was it in existence in ’78? The answer is yes. By 1978, there was in the Northeast region of the Reform rabbinical group a fund, which was really a tax, a mandatory tax, on every rabbi in the region of giving a minimum of one hundred dollars to this fund for Soviet Jewry. So every rabbi from Maine to Connecticut, who was a member of the northeast region, was required to donate a hundred dollars to this fund. That fund was used to send two colleagues in the region to the Soviet Union.

AH: This was all throughout the Northeast?

BM: The Reform movement’s structure is that there are regions. There's the Northeast region. There's the New York-New Jersey (catchment?), there’s –

AH: Right. Similar to how NFTY [North American Federation for Temple Youth, now the Reform Jewish Youth Movement] regions are?

BM: Exactly, exactly. So you grew up knowing about that? Okay. Exactly. So the rabbinic organizations mirror that. So there’s a PAFTY [Pennsylvania Federation of Temple Youth], and a – all of those acronyms, okay? You were asked to go to the Soviet Union based on how long your tenure was in the region. So there was no *yichus* [lineage, pedigree]; nobody had any *yichus* here; every rabbi was expected to go. So it took a few years before my turn because we had just arrived. Rabbi [Ronne] Friedman, who was my associate –

AH: We're going to be interviewing him as well, actually.

TSS: Next week.

BM: Okay. Well, he was my assistant for sixteen years, and then he succeeded me. So he and I – I came in February of ’78; he came in July of ’78. I can't give you the date, but it was in the ’80s, I don't remember the date, but we can find the date there. Well, I can pull my sermon upon my return. I have that separately. So that will tell you what year I went for the first time.

TSS: We can copy that.

BM: What?

TSS: Take a picture of that.

BM: You can do whatever you want. My pleasure.

TSS: Thank you.

BM: He and I went – So our turn came simultaneously because we came within five months of one another.

AH: [inaudible] up in the same year.

BM: (We came?) January – July. They were very eager for us to go. Rabbis can’t go in the fall because we have all the *chagim* [holidays]. [Telephone rings.] They were very [inaudible] for us to go in the spring because the weather was good … So we said we didn't want to go when every— – and we asked them, “Who goes in the spring?” They said, “Well, lots of groups go in the spring.” We said to them, “Well, who goes in January and February?” Nobody wanted to go to Russia in January and February. So (who set down?), they said, “Nobody.” So I said, “You mean, from October, November until

March, April, May, just passing numbers of people go as opposed to organized?" So we said, "We'll go in February." So we established [inaudible] [Someone enters, interrupting the conversation]… So we, we decided to go in February, March, or… I'll look at the dates, and you'll see. We sent out a letter to the whole congregation saying that we were going to the Soviet Union. We needed financial support. That we had money for the tickets from the rabbinical organization, but the trip would require substantial amounts of money because one of our tasks was to buy goods, quality goods. Now I'm not talking about the jeans part of it. That was part of it, but that was a minor part. I'm talking about heavy-duty stuff – cameras, camcorders, electronic materials for whatever, the electronics of the '80s. So everything and it's in proportion because those were extremely resalable on the black market, and families in the Soviet Union that declared they wanted to leave were immediately dismissed from their jobs. They lost their jobs. So they had no physical means of support. Plus, they gained the threat from OVIR [Office of Visas and Registration]. OVIR was the organization that oversaw their release, so to speak. That's an acronym; I don't know what it means, O-V-I-R. They were in – once they lost their jobs, they were in danger of becoming – what was the word that was used? It was a crime according to Soviet law. They were in danger of becoming –

TSS: Refusenik?

BM: No, no. Worse. Refusenik was already a good term. They were –

GW: In trouble?

BM: No, like a leech.

TSS: [inaudible] [laughter]

BM: A person who doesn't produce, doesn't work.

GW: A ward of the state?

BM: No, no, this is a negative word.

GW: Lecher? Deadbeat?

TSS: Leech sounds negative.

BM: No, it wasn't a leech. That's my word. I'll think of it. I'll think of it. Give me a minute. That was punishable by going to jail. Once they established that you were in this category – you didn't have a job, you had no physical means of support, you, therefore, became a burden on the state, and you were, therefore, a worthless citizen, and you could go to jail for this. So that was what hung over them. So these people were the highest focus of our concern because they needed *parnasa* [income, a livelihood] to survive. (Hence?) many of them had young children, and the children were ostracized in school, and it was a bad scene all around. We put this letter out. We began to invite groups of people who were responsive to us to my house, to his house, to the temple. There was an enormous outpouring of support, not only financial support but, for example, one of the members of the temple was in the [the business of] camera and photographic educational materials. So he sold us – in addition to making a donation of some of the material, he sold everything at cost to him to us, which enabled us to bring in a lot of stuff, but you had to get it past [laughter] –

Interviewer: Customs?

BM: – Customs. Well, not just get it past the – entry point at the airport.

GW: Yes, the security.

BM: Right? The security people. So we were loaded up with – we went in January – we'll look – in January or February. We brought in a lot of stuff on this first trip. Ronne and I went. We brought in a load of stuff – Hebrew books, Hebrew primers to learn to read and study Hebrew, *tanakhim* [Bibles, including the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and

the Writings], all kinds of Purim stuff, graggers [noisemakers used on Purim], *tallitot* [prayer shawls], *kippot*[yarmulkes], Shabbat candles, all these things which were very, very rare and basically forbidden.

AH: Forbidden in the Soviet Union?

BM: Religion was suppressed. You couldn't do that. You weren't allowed to do that. That was an anti-Soviet activity. Well, considered an anti-Soviet activity,

AH: Right, and that's why these people were burdened, it sounds like.

BM: Yes. What is the word? Parasite. They are parasites.

AH: That's helpful.

BM: They are parasites on the system. That's what they would charge with: parasitism. That's a pretty ugly word.

GW: Yes, very ugly. Going back for a second, why do you think the congregation was so supportive and generous with funds and material support for your and Rabbi Friedman's first trip?

BM: There are a number of reasons. I can't say there was one reason. I think certainly there's a certain degree that the rabbis asked them. That had a certain moral weight that their rabbis asked them to do this. Many of the people – the 1970s, we're talking… [counting to himself] We're talking thirty-five years after the Holocaust. There are a lot of American Jews who understood that the United States had not done enough under another perilous situation, and that shouldn't happen again. Maybe a third reason is just they thought it was the right thing to do. It was the right thing to do.

AH: Can you just remind me how the outreaching to your congregation worked? Did you guys give a sermon? Was there a letter that went out?

BM: Yes, all the above. We sent a letter to the whole congregation. We spoke about it before we went. We spoke about it on the Friday night after we returned. We had maybe fifteen hundred people in the synagogue that night.

GW: Going back to your trip to the Soviet Union, what was the Jewish community like that you encountered on your first trip with Rabbi Friedman?

BM: That's a hard – I'll tell you why that's hard. First of all, the way it worked. Everything was funneled through Action for Soviet Jewry. They had all of the on-the-ground contacts. They had compartmentalized organic groups of Soviet Jews throughout the Soviet Union; they were little clusters of people who knew one another. Cluster A most likely didn't know cluster B, and cluster B probably didn't know anything about C, and so on. So that was true. On my first trip, we went to Moscow [capital of Russia] and Leningrad [Russia]. On the second trip, we went to Moscow, Tashkent [capital of Uzbekistan], Leningrad, and –

GW: Riga [capital of Latvia]?

BM: Riga, right. Then we went to – that was the second group. The third time, I went to Moscow, Leningrad, and… We got turned – why I'm vague is that we would apply to cities, and sometimes they would allow us to go to two, and they would deny the third. We were denied going to Ukraine at least twice. We wanted to go to Ukraine; they wouldn't let us go. We wanted to go to – not important, but we wanted to go. So it's a little mixed up because we applied, and then sometimes they'd give us two. Sometimes they would say no. Sometimes between the no and the departure date, we had a chance to try to squeeze in the third place. They would say yes, or they would say no, so it's hard to say. The last trip was Moscow and Minsk [capital of Belarus]. That was the last – that was in 1990 – was my last trip to Belarus and to Babruysk [city in Belarus].

AH: If you don't mind me asking you – that's a wide range. 1990, it's fairly recent. How many of these missions and trips did your community attend throughout your tenure, throughout your period?

BM: Oh my god. Thousands of people. The Temple has got seventeen hundred families.

AH: I mean, how many of these missions went? How many different trips?

BM: After the first – Well, Rabbi Friedman did it – he'll give you the exact number. Trust me, don't trust me on numbers. He did at least two or three. I did five or six. After the first trip, after the first experience, Rabbi Friedman said, "We shouldn't be doing this alone. We should be taking laypeople." So he was – [to himself] how did this work? I went in that first year, and I went back the next year. The following year, he went, and I took the cantor.

AH: Right. Who we will be speaking with.

BM: Roy Einhorn, right?

TSS: Yes, we'll be speaking with him.

BM: He went with me. Then Ronne took – he'll tell you the number – two, three laypeople. Then I took a group with six. I took some older members of the congregation, Jeremy, who was the vice president of our youth group at the time, and the gal by the name of –

GW: Jennifer Greenfield?

BM: Jennifer Greenfield. She was the president, and he was the vice president or vice versa. They couldn't decide who's to go. So we said to the parents, "We'll put up the amount of money we can put up for them, what we have allotted for them. If you'll meet

the other half, they can go." And we took them. I think they went to Riga with us.

GW: Yes.

BM: Right? They went to Riga with us.

GW: Yes.

BM: We had a lot of trouble in Riga. Riga was one of the most difficult places to go to. They were extremely *makpidim* [strict, stringent] in Riga. When we landed, we were held back in the plane. Some functionary got on the plane and told us that our visas to stay in Riga for four or five days had been cut to twenty-four hours.

GW: What was that like to be told that on the plane?

BM: Miserable. We had thousands and thousands of dollars worth of goods. We were one of the first groups that got into Riga in a while. We had medicine. We had photographic stuff. The original rules – we had to deliver everything to the people per person. This was for this person; this was for that person. We had to find a safe house where we had literally left everything in the safe house with the names of who was supposed to get them and so forth.

GW: So, how long did you guys end up staying in Riga?

BM: Two days, I think. Two days.

GW: Did everything get to –?

BM: Yes. Well, far as we know.

GW: And to back up, what does *makpidim* mean?

BM: They're very –

TSS: Strict.

BM: – very strict. They were very –

TSS: *Rosh ba'kir*. [Editor's note: Israeli idiom literally meaning "head in the wall," referring to going about something in the most direct, brute-force way whether or not it's likely to work.] [laughter]

BM: What?

TSS: *Rosh ba'kir.*

BM: Right. They were very – yeah.

GW: Going back, we were reading in one of these articles in the [*Jewish*] *Advocate* that the first time you and Rabbi Friedman went to the Soviet Union, you guys were stopped at Customs, and they looked through your bags –

BM: Not mine.

GW: – Through Rabbi Friedman's bags and took out some electronics and a device that was going –

BM: I want to tell you that story. Do you have a full story on that? That is one of the most amazing stories of that whole period.

TSS: Please tell us.

GW: We read the newspaper account.

BM: They don't know the inside story.

TSS: We want to hear yours.

GW: We want to hear it –

AH: Your own perspective on it.

BM: My version.

GW: – from your perspective.

BM: I'll tell you that my version is the right version, [laughter] Because I was on top of that story. I was responsible for that. That actually originated not in Action for Soviet Jewry, but with – what's the other organization you mentioned? The numbers? The one from Great Britain?

GW: Eighteen? You mentioned it. Something with eighteen.

BM: Yes, some number. There was the women's number group in Great Britain. They sent to Judy Wolf – not Wolf. What was her last name? Her name is Judy. I'll come up with it. They wrote to Judy and said, "There's a woman in refusal in Moscow in need of a heart valve. She's been denied surgery because she's in refusal. She is, at this point, bedridden. Unless we can get a heart valve to her, she's probably going to die." So I don't know what you know about heart valves. Heart valves are down to the centimeter, the centimeter of your arteries that it's going to be attached to. They assumed, or whatever medical configuration that they came up with, they determined that there were two possible apertures that would work for this woman and that they would be the closest to the size of her heart, given her size or weight, whatever. I wasn't part of that. In this briefing, Judy says to us, "And we need to get two heart valves in for this woman in Moscow." Ronne and I looked at her and said, "How do we go about getting heart valves?" She said, "That's your problem. We don't have money for this." There had been a member of Temple Israel, a guy by the name of Dr. Levy, who was a child cardiologist at Children's Hospital here in Boston, who the very year that we're talking about had become the head of child cardiology at the University of Michigan Hospital and

had moved to Ann Arbor. He and his family had been friends of ours and had attended my seder [ritual feast the first nights of Passover] for several years. I picked up the phone, and I called him, and I said, “This is my problem.” He said, “Let me think about it, Rabbi. I don’t know. I don’t have a lot to do with the purchase of heart valves. When I do surgery, it’s there.” He called me back a couple of days later; he said, “When I was at medical school, there was an Arab Israeli born in Haifa” who was in his class, and they had become friends. Upon graduation, his Arab friend took a job with a large heart mechanism company in Southern California. He told me that since he called me, he had been in touch with this former classmate of his, who was an Israeli Muslim, who was very touched by the story and went to his boss, who was an American Protestant, and told him the story about the woman and so forth. The boss gave the Arab Israeli two heart valves that were then sent to us for free, no money.

GW: Wow.

BM: Yeah! Then the question came – how do you get a heart valve into the Soviet Union? [laughter] So they said the best way to do it is put it in your dopp kit [toiletry bag] and bury it in the bottom of your Dopp Kit. Okay. So I put it in the bottom of my dopp kit. I put all my stuff on top of it. Ronne does the same thing. Part of the instructions, part of the startup for the prep for the trip, is how do you go in. When you come in, you don't know one another; you separate from one another. If there are six or seven lines for going through customs, you go to A, and he goes to D, but you don't travel together; you don't go back-to-back or on the same line, and you go through. So we arrive in the airport, and I go one way; Ronne goes the other way. I go up. I show my passport, and – oh, I should say also this. This is an important part of the story. I bar mitzvahed a kid in Washington, my Washington days, who worked in Ted Kennedy's office [Editor’s Note: United States senator from Massachusetts from 1962-2009, younger brother of John F. and Robert F. Kennedy]. His name is Ben Binswanger. I called Ben on a whim. I said, “Ben, I'm going to –” I told him what you know. I said, “It would be very nice if Ronne

and I had a letter from Senator Kennedy to the American ambassador in Moscow introducing us," just to have in our breast pocket a letter from Kennedy introducing us to the ambassador of the United States in the Soviet Union. So we each had that on our bodies.

GW: That was common practice for travelers.

BM: It became common practice. That's correct. So we had these letters. Because it plays an important part in the end of the story. So I went up to the – I don't want to elongate this meeting, but the airport was dim and dark. It was gray. It was cold, freezing cold, very little heat, and smelly. Before I went to the Soviet Union, [Andrei] Sakharov's wife – you know who Sakharov was? Sakharov was the Nobel Prize in Physics; he's from the Soviet Union, married to Yelena Bronner – Bonner, who was a Jew. He was an outspoken human rights guy. He was not allowed to leave the Soviet Union. Bonner's [Editor's Note: often says "Bronner" instead of "Bonner"] daughter had left the Soviet Union, was living in Newton [Massachusetts], and she periodically came. One of the women who played a key role in helping us with things within the congregation was a woman who was born in Czarist Russia, who spoke old fashioned Russian, but she spoke Russian. She had the whole American piece as opposed to the newcomers who really didn't have the American piece. She befriended Bonner. Before we left, I insisted that we see Bonner, who was staying with a friend. She had actually had surgery here. She was staying with a friend in Brookline [Massachusetts]. One night, we went over to this apartment, and Bonner was there recuperating from some sort of chest surgery; I don't remember exactly what it was. We talked, and we talked, and so forth. The last thing she said to us – she said, "When you're in the Moscow railroad station, use the men's room." Okay. Rather bizarre instruction. When I tell you, I couldn't open the door to the men's room and step over the threshold – that's how disgusting and smelly – and this is winter; this was freezing cold February. It was beyond anything you've ever experienced in your life, ever. So when I speak about smells, the

airport smelt, and it was dim, and it was dark, and it was miserable. So I go to line A, whatever it is, and he goes to line C or D, go through, and it's smelly, and it's miserable. I'm whisked right through. He goes like this through my suitcase, pats me down – goodbye. I walk out of the room. An hour passes. No Ronne. An hour and a half passes. No Ronne. So I say to myself, “There’s going to be an announcement over the loudspeaker for me to come back because they found him out.” What did I know? That was my assumption. I'm walking around and walking around. In the meantime, all the passengers are coming out. The airport gets dimmer. They dim the lights. Whatever lights (there?) were, dim the lights for – the airport is like no man's land, nothing, zero. I'm staring around, walking around. Finally, there was one spot where I could see through the Venetian blinds. I could see into the area I had just been, that I had passed through. [There] were sort of like lanes, and they had numbers on the top of them. They had traffic lights: red, yellow, and green. I could just barely make out the lane he was in with all of his stuff piled high on the counter. The red light was on on the traffic light apparatus. I said, “We're gone. We're finished. This is not happening. We're on the next plane back.” I waited another two hours in that dark, dank airport. Finally, he comes through, and he was sweating and pale. [laughter] He was miserable. I said, “What happened?” He said, “They emptied my whole suitcase. They piled up all the Jewish stuff – the Purim stories, the graggers, the *Tanakhim*, the Hebrew books – everything was in a mountain on the counter.” They went into his Dopp kit, and they found the heart valve. Said, “why are you traveling with a heart valve?” [laughter] He'll tell you this story, I'm sure. He said, “I have a heart condition, and my cardiologist said I can't travel anywhere in the world without a heart valve, ([aside]?) this is a heart valve, in the event that I have any problems.” So they go into some sort of confabulation about this for another twenty, thirty minutes. They come back, and said, “You can't take this in.” Whereby he takes out the letter from Kennedy. He said, “I have a letter to the ambassador of the Soviet Union from Senator Kennedy. I would like you to call the United States ambassador.” They got scared. That was a little beyond them. He said –

So another half an hour passed, and they came out with a document saying that they had confiscated his heart valve and that it would be returned to him at (Sheremetyevsky?) Airport when he departed. It was all in Cyrillic. He said, “I won’t sign this. I don't know what it says. I can't read Cyrillic. I don't know Russian. I refuse to sign it.” That sent them into another dither. He said, “If you give it to me in English, I will sign it. But I will not sign it in Cyrillic.” It was gutsy. So another hour passed. They came back with an English version. I think it was only because we had the letter, only because we had the letter. He signed the letter and demanded a copy of it. Then they let him out. They gave everything back. They dumped all the *tanakhim*, all the *tallitot*, everything that we were carrying; they didn't take anything – nothing else was confiscated. Then he came out, and we found a cab, and we went to our hotel. By that time, it was now – I think we had arrived at nine o'clock at night or ten o’clock at night. It was like one, two o'clock in the morning.

GW: He was able to take the heart valve after all?

BM: No. No, no, they confiscated it, but with an English document saying that it would be returned –

GW: When he left the country.

BM: – when he left. They undoubtedly noted that the American ambassador is aware of this story, or would be aware of. Which he was, notified about. [deep breath] We get to the hotel, which is right on Red Square, called the Natsional [the Hotel National], a dump [laughter] for which I'm sure we paid, in those days, probably three hundred dollars a night. You can’t imagine. You just can’t imagine. We were warned that we shouldn't speak about anything in the room because the rooms were bugged. On every single floor of the hotel, there was a desk and a person in the desk who was recording when you arrived, when you left your room, when you came back to your room. There was a whole log of every one of our movements. They had the key to our room. We returned

our key to that person, and we received our key from that person. So we get to our room; we were told to do hand language, and write notes to another and tear the pieces of paper up, and all of that kind of pseudo stuff. I finally said to Ronne, [gestures?] like this, but he got the message. We put our coats on)around?) 2:30 in the morning; we leave the hotel and start walking around Red Square because that was the safest place to talk. I said, “We might be out of here tomorrow. There's a good chance that they're on to our case.” We have one heart valve left. If we get that delivered, the rest doesn't count. *Pikuach nefesh doche et ha’kol*, saving a human life is more important than any other thing. [Editor’s Note: this is a concept in Jewish law that allows one to violate most commandments if a life or someone’s health is at stake.] So one o'clock in the morning, two o'clock in the morning, we call the person who's our contact from Action for Soviet Jewry, who's supposed to arrange our first meeting. We don't know the names of any of the people we're meeting. We only know the name of our contact. We have no idea who's in our cluster. Okay? We call this person; two o’clock in the morning we awaken this person, we say to them, we say, as best we can – they said to us that you were safer to use a public telephone. So we walked a few blocks from our hotel, we found the public telephone booth, we called this person, and said, “We have an appointment to meet you tomorrow in the late afternoon. We're afraid that that might be too late because they might kick us out of here before five o'clock, given the givens. We really need to meet you in the morning so that we can deliver what we have.” I don't think I said, “the heart valve.” So the person said, “Meet us at such and such a subway station at such and such a time. Be in the last car of the train. I will be on the platform with a woolen stocking hat with a red ball on the bottom of it.” So we take the train. What did we know? We knew a little about the system. We had learned the Cyrillic alphabet because we had to know the subway stations. We had to be able to read subway signs. We didn't know a word in Russian except *nyet* [no] and two other words. We get off on the train station. There's nobody with a stocking hat. Nobody with a hat with a red ball at the end of it. Nothing. So we're fretting that – now we’re really in total paranoia that they

found out, they've intercepted us. Your mind does crazy things. So we go over onto the street. We find another telephone place. We call the person again. He says, “Where were you? I was there.” I said, “No, you weren't.” I said, “We were at the station.” It turned out that the station had a lower level and an upper level. The train we came in was on one level, and he was waiting on the other level. He says, “Where are you?” I said, “We’re on such-and-such a street at such-and-such a place. He said, “I'll meet you in half an hour, walk three blocks to such a place. I will meet you. I will have a stocking cap with a red (little ball?).” So we did. He was there. Took us to his apartment. We explained what happened and explained what our anxiety was about. He made a telephone call. A young woman, maybe your age, arrived. Her name was – she’s in Boston now. Charny.

GW: Anna Charny?

BM: Anna Charny was there. Anna Charny came. Her father was holding the meeting that night at his apartment. That was the first time we heard the name Charny. We did not know that's who we were seeing, I don't believe. She came, and she said, “My father is not well enough to come.” We explained the situation and so forth. She said she knew exactly for whom this – she knew the person for whom the heart valve was for. We gave her the heart valve. We were going to see her at her father's apartment for whatever the fixed hour of the night was. We came. We did last a day. We lasted the whole trip, as it turned out. We went to the apartment, and the cluster was there. All the members of the cluster were there. Then Charny, at that time, had the heart valve. The biggest Russian I ever saw in my life arrived. He was around six-six and very large, imposing. His name was Friedlander. And Ben Charny says to me, “You brought the valve for his wife. He knows nothing about it.” He then takes the valve off the shelf, hands it to me, and says, “You give it to him.” I said, “No, no, you give it to him. You can tell him in Russian.” He said, “No, you bought it; I didn't.” So he comes over, and he introduces me. I tell him – somebody was translating; I don't know who. I give him the

heart valve, and he breaks down, weeping. Everybody is weeping at this point. We explain that the other valve – that they're not going to be able to go forward with the surgery because the other valve has been confiscated. We weren't sure that we were going to get it back or not, but we hoped we would get it back. If we did get it back, we would make every effort to get it back in as quickly as possible. So you may ask why we had two valves. Well, there were two reasons we had two valves. One was because of the aperture; they got them as close as they could physiologically figure out that she might need. The second one was a bribe for the surgeon. The surgeon got to keep the second one for breaking the law and doing surgery on a refusenik. Okay. That's the story.

GW: What were you feeling when you gave –?

BM: I was weeping. [laughter] The nice end of the story was that he did get the valve back. When we left, it was waiting for him. And that is all connected to Kennedy's letter (to?) the ambassador. We got back to Action, and there was a group of Brits who were going from that organization that we mentioned earlier, were going the following week to Moscow. That was brought in by them, and the surgery was done. The valve that we brought in was inserted. She and her husband, the Friedlanders, were released, and Temple Israel resettled them in Boston.

GW: You mentioned your relationship with Ben Charny, your first meeting with Ben Charny. Where did your relationship with Ben –? How did it develop after that first meeting in Moscow?

BM: Ben was the organizing principle of that cluster. He was at the center of that cluster. He already had been refused at least twice at that time. He had a malignancy that was not being treated because he was in refusal. The OVIR office had – I don't remember the exact number of years, but he was not allowed to reapply for exit for a year or two. I don't remember exactly. Every group from our temple that went over the

next few years visited with Ben. Ben was the touchpoint in all of this. I can give you the year. I don't remember the year. That's definitely in that file there. Then, in February of whatever year we're talking about in the ’80s, he reapplied. By this time, he was already sick. His cancer had already become more aggressive. He was really sick. He applied whenever the time-lapse was that he could reapply, and he was denied for four years. He could not reapply for four years, which is basically a death sentence at that point. I received that information in February of whatever year we’re talking about in the ’80s. It was a Tuesday night. I remember it was a Tuesday night because it was the night that we had a board meeting. It was a bad snowstorm, and not very many people showed up to the board meeting. I live walking distance to the temple, so I walked over. We had the meeting of the board, and there was no quorum. So they couldn't convene a meeting. So there were around twenty people there. Somebody said, “Rabbi, do you have something to tell us? We can't have an official meeting because we don't have a quorum, but is there anything pressing that we should know about?” So I got up, and I told them what I just told you about Ben, that he had been refused for four years, that it was a death sentence. I said, “If anybody in this room has a connection to Armand Hammer, this is the kind of case that Armand Hammer might take into consideration.” You know Armand Hammer?

AH: We know them as the company that makes baking soda.

BM: Yeah, yeah. But did you ever – The name? Arm and Hammer, the symbol of the Soviet Union – arm and hammer. His father was a communist. [Editor’s Note: While Armand Hammer became a stockholder of Arm & Hammer, the latter’s name is unrelated to his, while their logo comes from the older tradition of the arm-and-hammer as a symbol of Vulcan, the brand originally being part of Vulcan Spice Mills. Hammer’s own name may have come from the arm-and-hammer symbol of the Socialist Labor Party of the US, of which his father was an influential member; or it may have come from the character Armand Duval in Alexandre Dumas’s *La Dame aux Camélias*. The symbol of the Soviet

Union is actually not the arm-and-hammer but the hammer-and-sickle, though both have been used as symbols of labor solidarity.] At this time, he was a man in his late seventies, early eighties. His father [Julius Hammer] was a personal friend of Nikolai Lenin. His father was responsible for building one of the first pencil companies, wooden lead pencils, in the Soviet Union and had a personal relationship with Lenin. Throughout the ’20s, ’30s, ’40s, ’50s, he was an American supporter of the Soviet Union. His son he named Armand Hammer. [Editor’s Note: pronounced as “Arm-and Hammer.”] He was a *farbrente* [Yiddish, “devout, fervent,” literally “burning”], a burning Red. [He] became the president – this is almost absurd – [of] Occidental [Petroleum]. He was the president of Occidental [Petroleum] in California, and he continued human interests in the Soviet Union out of respect and memory of his old man, even though he was a capitalist. Ironies of life. He often would fly people who had serious illnesses all over the world and bring them to hospital centers that will take care of them. I thought, having known that, that this might – it was a Soviet, it was somebody who had cancer, it had a lot of sex appeal. Okay? So one woman gets up at this meeting, who was the chair of the library committee of Temple Israel. She says, “Rabbi Mehlman, you know somebody who works for Armand Hammer.” I said, “I do?” She said, “Yes. Do you know the woman who was the head of Facing History and Ourselves?” Do you know what that is? Facing History and Ourselves was the first major educational endeavor to create curricula around the Holocaust, integrated into seventh and eighth-grade teaching throughout the United States. The woman's name who came up with this idea and who formulated it, and it's now a national program – now an international program, actually – was named Margot Strom, S-T-R-O-M. She just retired maybe two years ago. Margot was a member of Temple Israel. I knew her because I had helped her make connections to certain people who would be sympathetic to what she was doing. Also, she was very interested in finding survivors who would come and actually teach in classrooms, tell their stories. It was part of the curriculum. At that time, we had many survivors, adult survivors of the Holocaust. She said, “Do you know Margot Strom?” I said, “Yes.” She

says – and this woman was a friend of Margot's – “If I'm not mistaken, you married her brother when you were a rabbi in Washington, and he's the chief counsel to Armand Hammer.” Okay? The meeting ended seven thirty, seven – it was a six o’clock meeting; instead of ending at nine or ten, depending on how much business – there was no business. That was the end of the meeting. I went home. Everybody was home because it was snowing. I called Margot. I said to Margot, “Margot. I married your brother, Jerry. What does he do?” She says, “He's an attorney in LA [Los Angeles, California].” I said, “What kind of an attorney?” She says, “Well, he's a counsel for Occidental [Petroleum] in LA.” I says, “Does he have access to Armand Hammer?” She says, “Why are you asking?” I said, "Just answer my question. Does he have access to Armand?” She said, “He’s his personal attorney.” I said, “I want his phone number.” So she gave me his phone number. So, background: he was a member of my temple in Washington. He married a Washington girl. I officiated the wedding in his house in Washington. I'm one of those rabbis that never ever ever ever – I have never taken one red cent (for?) conducting any ceremony. Never. I was never a rabbi for hire. Any money that people wanted to give me went into the rabbi’s discretionary fund. I never earned money from bar mitzvahs and weddings. I didn't want to be tipped. I didn't want any tips. I didn't go to school for ten years to get tips. So I said to Jerry, I said, “Jerry, this is Rabbi Mehlman. Do you remember(, like…?)?” “Rabbi, yes, you married me, blah, blah, blah,” and so on, and so on. Then I said to him, “Jerry, when you got married, you tried to give me a check, and I refused it.” I said, “I'm calling to check-in.” He said, “What do you mean?” And I told him the story about Ben. He says, “Do you have papers? Do you have medical papers? Do you have hospital records?” “I have everything. I have everything you need.” He says, “You overnight them to me.” This was February. I overnighted them the next day. On June 15th, 16th– I don’t remember – Armand Hammer flew Ben Charny to Boston. That's how he got treated. We had people in our congregation who were on the staff of Tufts Medical School, had gotten Tufts to commit to treat him for nothing, and he was treated there.

GW: What was it like to see Ben in the United States?

BM: It was amazing ([laughter]?). He was refused in February. I had gone to see him in January. I'd gone to see him again, and he was sick. He was already sick. I brought him one of my neckties to cheer him up. I brought him a necktie, which was my own; it wasn't a new tie. I brought him one of my neckties, and I said to him, "Ben, I brought you this necktie because when you come off the plane, I want you to be wearing it." So a little symbol of *tikvah*[Hebrew, "hope"] – give him a little hope. So this then happened in February because he was waiting to hear about whether he was going to be released or not. When he arrived at the airport, Ted Kennedy was there. John Kerry [US Senator for Massachusetts from 1985-2013] was there. The mayor of Boston was there. The governor of Massachusetts. It was a big deal. And he came off the plane wearing my tie.

GW: Who was the governor at the time?

BM: Holy shit. Who was the governor in 19 –? I would have to look up the date…

AH: What year was this?

BM: It had to be in the '80s, in the early '80s.

GW: Was it [Thomas] Menino who was mayor?

BM: It might have been [Michael] Dukakis [as governor].

AH: I think it was Dukakis.

BM: Maybe it was Dukakis. Kitty [Dukakis] was there for sure. Kitty was there for sure. She was involved in this, too.

GW: In general, what was Ben like as a person?

BM: He was a great person. One of the smartest people I ever met. He was a mathematician. I might have – I don't remember where I put it.

TSS: Is that the one who got the fellowship in LA?

GW: Yes, Pitzer College.

BM: He got what?

TSS: A fellowship to teach in LA.

GW: We read that you worked –

BM: This is what we wore the day he came off the plane.

GW: Wow. We found some articles from the *LA Times* when you were interviewed about getting Ben a position at, I think, one of the Claremont Colleges?

BM: Yes. He lived in California for a few years. Those were probably the happiest and best years. He was relatively healthy at that time.

GW: He lived in California after living in Boston, right?

BM: He lived in Boston for a short time (and then he did?) this thing –.

GW: Because he was at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology].

BM: They gave him an office at MIT. Guys, I don't know where to begin; there's so many stories.

GW: Well, there was another family, the Gilbo family.

BM: Oh, yes. I gave that name to (Jonathan?). Did you guys contact them?

GW: I don't know. They weren't assigned to us. But in these *Jewish Advocate* articles, they were another family that was mentioned.

BM: They're still here. They're alive. They're both alive.

GW: When did you meet them for the first time?

BM: On that first trip in Leningrad. He was the head of the Leningrad cluster.

GW: What was the husband's name again?

BM: Evgeny. They call him Gene now. He’s Evgeny, and her name is Tanya.

GW: How is the Leningrad community different than the Jewish community in Moscow?

BM: Ostensibly not different, really; it just depended on what cluster you were in. For example, my cousin. I have a cousin who lives in Dallas. He was doing this kind of stuff. He's much younger than I am. He and his wife were very active through the local – the equivalent of CJP [Combined Jewish Philanthropies] here.

TSS: (Federation?).

GW: Yes, I know what you’re talking about.

BM: I don't know what it's called in Dallas, but like the CJP, they were very active. They went to the Soviet Union. They had contact with a guy who now lives in Israel. He was a real *shavei tzion* type. He was an amazing character. Anyway, I’ll think of his name in a minute. I know his name. But I need the synapse to close. Dredging up 1980s memories, it’s pretty hard to do without any preparation. He was a guy who fell in love with the Hebrew language. He knew nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Zero.

TSS: Your cousin?

BM: No, no, this is Gilbo.

GW: Gene Gilbo.

BM: Gilbo was the center of my cluster. My cousin had a different cluster. The guy's name was Yoffe [?j?f?], Y-O-F-F-E. *Yafeh* [ja?f?] or *yofi* [?jofi] or something like that originally. [Editor's Note: these are both forms of a Hebrew word meaning "lovely, nice, pretty." The former is the adjectival form while the latter is used as an interjection (like "Nice!" in English).] This guy Yoffe – nothing, nothing Jewish, zero, zero! They were very effective in seventy years. They were very effective in truncating the continuity of Jewish learning. But he somehow fell in love with the Hebrew language, particularly in Bible. He started to make his own dictionary. I saw it with my own eyes. Somehow, don't ask me how, he got his hands on a lexicon of the Hebrew Bible that was published before the revolution in 1901, maybe, in Lithuania. What's the important city?

GW: Vilnius?

BM: Vilnius. Right. He had gotten his hands on this old decrepit thing, and he had chapters and chapters and chapters of Bible that he had translated from Hebrew. He was learning Hebrew, self-taught, no teacher!

AH: We don't know how he got a hold of the lexicon?

BM: I have no idea how he got the lexicon. But he had it. I saw it. I smuggled a new one for him on my next trip. I brought in a good one. Temple Israel eventually helped him, and we got him to Israel. He lives outside of Tel Aviv. He had one daughter. [very faint ringing sound] Is that (a?) bell?

GW: Yes.

BM: I don't have any other appointments. Hang on a second …

[End of Track One]

GW: All the literature about the American Soviet Jewry movement says how it was this real strength of power for American Jewry after the Holocaust, and it showed the might and the potential of the American Jewish community. How did the Soviet Jewry movement change your view of American Jewry?

BM: Well, here are all the photographs. Here's Jeremy.

AH: I see it. Wow.

BM: Here's the group with Jeremy. The young girl is…

GW: Another question. Why was it important to take young people like Jeremy and his colleague from NFTY on trips like this to the Soviet Union?

BM: Why was it important?

TSS: You need to tell us who is in the picture.

BM: What? I know who's in the picture. I know I should be better, but I'm not.

AH: Who is this man that looks like Jeremy is with, in the picture?

BM: When we were at Ben's apartment – here is Jeremy with Ben. This is Ben, and this is his wife, Yadviga. On that trip – I forgot that – the rabbi from Worcester [Rabbi Seth L. Bernstein] went with me.

AH: Which one is Ben?

BM: This is Ben. This is Ben. This is Yadviga, his wife.

TSS: Aaron, can you bring me your phone, please?

BM: They're both dead.

TSS: I don't have memory on my card anymore.

AH: Here, let me pass this to you.

BM: One of the things that we did in terms of publicity was we – one of the things that we did was we had postcards printed at the temple, of the families that the congregation adopted to help to get out. Every Friday night and Shabbat morning, we would hand out the postcards, and the postcards were addressed to different people. Here's one on – this is a very late one, but I want to get an earlier one. This was a late one. This was a somewhat later one. [pause while he searches] This is an earlier one. Here's Ben. So here was a card that we printed. This was sent to [Mikhail] Gorbachev. It was written in Russian and it had a picture of Ben, heart patient and cancer patient, and we–

TSS: I want to take a picture.

BM: I have one for – we had it for Sharansky, too. I had one for Sharansky, too. All these came from Temple Israel. We would have a person, a member of the temple, who was sitting after the service and selling stamps, whatever the amount of stamps – the price was rounded out to the nearest dollar, and the money was put into the fund to help the families. So this was for Sharansky, so this goes back a long time, and this was sent to the ambassador to the Soviet Union. This was a family – all these families we got out. All of these families we got out. All of these people Temple Israel supported in one way or the other, whether they came here or whether they went to Israel. This couple is now dead, but they got out. (Shulsky?) – we got them out.

GW: Was adopting (of?) families, is that something a lot of Reform congregations did across the country?

BM: Yes. Natasha and Leonid Stonov are in Chicago now. Here's the (Offit?) family, thirteen years in refusal at the time. The last trip I took was in 1990, and that's when I went to Moscow. That's where (Millman?) – there's the family (Millman?). That older couple, the one underneath that. The (Brodskys?) had two daughters: the older daughter was the daughter of his first marriage, the second girl was the daughter – her name is Olga; and they live in Needham. The (Yudelevich?) Family – we helped get them out, and they're now in St. Louis. One of the things that we always brought in – we brought in things for kids. In those days – you guys don't know. Nobody's a Bostonian here? No?

TSS: A what?

BM: A Bostonian. From Boston. You're from where?

AH: New York.

BM: And you?

GW: Cleveland.

BM: Cleveland. Anyway, there was a store in this city called Filene's Basement.

AH: I know that store well.

BM: Okay. We used to buy a lot of stuff at Filene's Basement to bring into the Soviet Union. We were told that when we went to this family, the (Brodskys?), that they had a nine-year-old daughter, and I bought this dress for her.

TSS: That's nice.

BM: Then I wrote an op-ed piece that appeared in the Boston Herald about – which was just this picture. It was a winner;Filene's Basement as part of the byline – it brought a lot of pressure. They're out; they're here. Both those women are now married.

GW: What did it feel like to bring that –?

BM: I don't know how much of this stuff you want to see. I have lots of it.

GW: What did it feel like to bring that to the Soviet Union and see that little girl wearing that dress with so much pride?

BM: [laughter] It was great! Here's a very famous – we helped him. He was a *shavei tzion*. He's in Israel now. He was a tough, tough character. I'll think of his name in a minute. He was completely devoted to a woman... – This is Eugene, you asked me about Eugene. – Lein, his last name is Lein, L-E-I-N. He's in Jerusalem [Editor's Note: city's name said in Hebrew, *Yerushalaim.*] now. This is Gene Gilbo.

AH: Right, Gilbo.

BM: Gilbo. That's Eugene Gilbo. These were all taken – this guy was very suspicious of Americans. He didn't like us. He had been working tirelessly on behalf of Lein. Lein had been working on behalf of a woman who had tried to become a refusenik, and they put her in a mental institution in an isolation place. She had written an account of her time secretly, and Lein would go and visit her. But he had no way of copying it because he was always searched. Somebody – I don't know who – smuggled the manuscript out of the hospital, and Lein was very eager to get a lens that could photograph written documents. It was very, very expensive in those days, extremely expensive. The member of our temple I told you about donated that lens, and Stonov didn't want to meet with us. Stonov was a very – a really driven man. Until Gilbo said to him, in code, "He has something you're very interested in; you better meet with him." So we went to his house, and he didn't even know that we were bringing it, and we brought him that lens, which he then photographed all of the accounts of this woman, which we then carried out in our luggage, which was then printed for the first time in the West. Then he became my friend; then I was okay. These photographs are the arrival of Ben Charny's daughter,

son-in-law, and infant child. They did not allow Ben to leave, but they allowed – which was a frequent ploy – to let the children go. Even though he was sick, [Ben Charny] insisted that they go. This is a series of pictures at Logan [Airport].

TSS: Is Anna his daughter or his–?

BM: Anna and her then-husband, who eventually she divorced because he 'be-*frum*-ed.' He became very *frum*[Yiddish, 'observant, religious'], and she couldn't handle that, and they divorced. But at that time, they were still married, and we took care of them. This is Anna, and that's her husband, Uri. That's her sister-in-law whom you should meet, (Yelena?).

GW: Charny?

BM: Charny – (Yelena?).

GW: We've tried. We haven't been able to get in contact.

BM: Because her father died. Her father had a heart attack in July. He was sick all through the summer. He died either just before Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur.

GW: It was early October. I think it was just before Yom Kippur.

BM: Yes. He died. I just came from lunch with her. I just had lunch with her today, and I told her about you guys. I said, "You should do it." So you can make another effort at her. She understands now. Her life has really been crazy. So that's the series of – this is at the airport. These are just the random photographs of the Leningrad synagogue. Why they're in that mix, I don't know.

GW: Now, we're getting into the phase of the émigrés coming to the United States. How did your relationship change, if at all, with the émigrés once they got to the (US?)?

BM: Oh, entirely, entirely, because we had a different mission. Our mission then became: how do we integrate them? How do we get them jobs? How do we get them apartments? That was a whole different dimension of all of this.

GW: What was the biggest challenge of the integration process into the USA with the émigrés?

BM: [long pause] I don't know if you saw this article in the *Advocate* from ‘86.

TSS: I think we read it.

BM: I don't know.

GW: Yes, I think that we did.

TSS: Yes, we read it (at school?).

BM: So I started going in ’86. I started going in ’84, ’86. So – I don't know what you want to do with these things.

Interviewer: We’ll look at it.

BM: You said you saw that… I don’t know what else I have here. I think I know what I have in the (statement?). This is the *New York Times* from 1967.

Interviewer: Gimbels was still around.

BM: Right.

TSS: Who is Gimbel?

BM: It was a big department store in New York. This is October 26, 1967; it’s a *New York Times* article on “Soviet Union's Jews Pose Special Problem for the Kremlin's

Nationality Policy." I don't know if you're interested in that. So now we're getting dates about when I started to get involved – the late '60s. In terms of sermons, we ran services in Russian.

GW: Whose decision –?

BM: Mine.

GW: Yours?

TSS: Do you speak Russian?

BM: No. But I told you about this lady who was born in pre-Soviet Russia. She organized the whole deal. She translated things into Russian, and then the Russians got up and read them. So the service was in Hebrew, Russian and English.

GW: What were those services like?

BM: A three-ring circus. [laughter]

GW: What made them a three-ring circus?

BM: So here's a sermon I preached in Washington. No. Here's a sermon I preached in 1966 on Soviet Jewry, in 1966.

TSS: Where?

BM: In New York, when I was an assistant Rabbi at Shaarei Tefillah. All the paperwork I have. This was a great lady. I don't know if she's still alive. Did you run across the name of Betsy Gidwitz?

AH: I don't think so.

GW: No. Maybe.

BM: She was incredible. She was primarily out of the JCC, the Jewish Community Council.

GW: In Boston?

BM: An article by her.

GW: The name doesn't ring a bell.

BM: "The status of Soviet Jewry." So this must be from my Washington days; this is from B'nai Brith. Then Golda Meir wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* in December of 1970, "Mrs. Meir's Moscow Memory."

TSS: Oh, Golda.

BM: Golda, she was [inaudible].

GW: What was the biggest –?

BM: So '84, we had a service welcoming Soviet Jews. I preached at that.

GW: How did the Soviet Jews –?

BM: It was then translated into Russian or summarized in Russian; this was in 1984 future union – a Russian service – future union.

GW: How did the Soviet Jews integrate into Temple Israel?

BM: With a lot of work. Most of the work – once we got past '83… I can't give you – this is a sermon at a service, a Russian service that was summarized.

GW: What made it difficult to integrate them?

BM: Culture, culture, culture. They didn't bathe. They didn't go to dry cleaners. They didn't brush their teeth. These were all luxuries. They would walk in for an interview at the beginning, before we got savvy, and they were wearing these clothes that smelled terrible. The first person they met was some twenty- or twenty-two-year-old receptionist who took one whiff and said, "Oh, there's a smelly guy outside." Think about American culture, taking a shower every day, and underarm deodorant, and how Americans are crazy about being clean and physically clean. Somebody walks in with a polyester suit that stinks to high heaven, hasn't shaven properly, or hasn't brushed his teeth properly, and are you going to give him a job? Think American. Superficial American. That's a no-no. So we started to have classes at the temple. We had classes taught by Russians, by Leon Charny, by Yelena's husband. Leon organized people who had already been here – he went to MIT, so he was already Americanized; thoroughly Russian, but he was Americanized. He found people who were already Americanized, and they (laid base?). We ran classes. Take a shower. Don't wear a suit more than three times before you have it cleaned. Every time you go for an interview: a clean shirt, underarm deodorant, no smells. I mean, stuff that you and I take for granted. So that kind of reorientation. Then the next step, after we got them to take baths and to clean their clothes and how to tie a knot American-style, so they didn't look like Gorbachev.

TSS: It's sort of *ulpan* [Israeli Hebrew immersion programs for new immigrants].

BM: Right.

TSS: I'm thinking about what it was like for the immigrants who came to Israel (, was it?) the same?

BM: Exactly. Right.

GW: What did you guys do in terms of Jewish education?

BM: There's a picture there. Right over there. Look to your left. On the table. On my messy desk. To your left, not your –

TSS: This one?

BM: No, no.

TSS: This one?

BM: Yeah. Pull it – There are boys, a lot of boys and a few girls. That's the first class of b'nai mitzvah of Soviet Russian kids that came to Boston. We had a mass bar mitzvah for these kids. We didn't miss anything. I wish I had dated everything. Not everything is dated. This is 1990. This is 1986.

GW: Who from the congregation was leading these efforts? Besides Leon, who was leading the Judaic courses?

BM: Very complicated [inaudible] to that.

AH: One of the other folks that were interviewing is Fran Putnoi.

TSS: Who we hope to interview.

AH: [inaudible] war crime –

BM: She went – I took her to the Soviet Union. She went with me with her husband. We took doctors in. We also took people who we thought would make good propaganda once they returned. They were respected members of the community, and they would tell their stories of their experience. [long pause] So after they got the basic "wash yourself, clean yourself, brush your teeth," and that kind of stuff, we ran English classes, elementary English classes, English as a second language class. We ran a whole series of classes in Jewish history, culture, and the like, for the older people who were retired,

who weren't going to go to work, they were just at home doing nothing; and who had more of a sense of some connection. They still could remember from parents and grandparents before the seventy years. They still had some – they knew about Shabbat candles. But these young ones? They knew nothing. Nothing. Nothing. So we ran, at least for ten years, eight to ten years of classes for these older people to give them something to do. We had a history [teacher] – and we found some Russian speakers who could do that. The second stage, after what I call that initial state of orienting them, cleaning them up – how do you write a resume that is intelligible to an employer?

TSS: America 101.

BM: Yes. And then, after they learned how to do that, then we brought in from our congregation about fifteen or twenty HR [human resources] people from many different jobs, and they set up mock interviews. So they would come to the temple on a Tuesday night. There would be ten interviews going for an hour. So, in a night, they did thirty interviews. People would be prepped to go out and interview for a job.

TSS: Didn't they have to learn English before?

BM: Well, they did. But some of them, their English was not as important because many – I wouldn't say all of them, but many of them were doing technical stuff. They were doing computers and all that stuff that I don't understand.

AH: So did these programs – among the people who enrolled in them, did it seem to help? Help them to find jobs?

BM: Sure. First of all, we also went to our congregation to find people who were looking for work, who were looking for employees. Second of all, we hooked people up to pair them with families in the congregation that would invite them to Shabbat dinner. So they'd see a Shabbat dinner, and what is a kiddush, and what is lighting candles, and what is a challah, etc., etc., etc. So to sort of try and educate them. Some of them made

very lasting relationships. Some of them fell by the wayside. Some of them took jobs in other cities, moved away. Some of them got a bar mitzvah, and then they abandoned the temple.

TSS: Like any other Reform Jews.

BM: What?

TSS: Like a lot of Reform Jews.

BM: Like a lot of Reform and Conservative Jews. They want the kid there for the bar mitzvah, and the bar mitzvah is over, it's *shalom aleichem* ["Peace be upon you," a traditional phrase used for greeting and parting]. Right?

GW: Are you still in touch with some of these families today and individuals?

BM: Yes, I personally am. I'm still friendly with Gilbo. I'm friendly with the Charnys. Yes. I'm friendly with the Brodskys from Minsk. I'm friendly with – yes.

GW: Have you been back since your trip in 1990 to the USSR?

BM: I do not have any desire to go to Russia.

GW: How come?

BM: None. It's off my list.

AH: It's changed there.

TSS: In my program, there's a girl from St. Petersburg.

BM: [claps once] *Kol hakavod* [Hebrew, "congratulations" or "well done," literally "ll the respect."]. [claps once]

TSS: And one from Poland, actually.

BM: (Also.?) I've been there too. [laughter]

GW: What was it like to see the USSR through your congregants' eyes?

BM: Through my congregants' eyes?

GW: Yes, through Jeremy's eyes and Putnois's eyes. What was it like to be in the USSR with them?

BM: What more do I have to say to you? Jeremy's around. Do I have to tell you anything more?

GW: I know what you mean.

TSS: We'll ask him.

BM: Ask him.

GW: I guess the question is –

BM: The young woman that was there is a member of the temple, is on the board of the temple. Her children are in our religious school. You talk about payback? I mean, if you want to be crass about it, there is a lot of payback here. Some people's lives were transformed by this. There's one woman in our congregation – that's another person you might want to see. I don't think I gave that name. Now that we're talking about this – she's a bit older but not as old as I am. [to self] Now I've got to think of her name [inaudible]. [aloud] She lives in Newton, in what we lovingly call Tel Aviv West.

TSS: Jewton?

BM: No, no. There's an apartment building as you're driving out on Route Nine on the West. There is a whole complex there. It's called Tel Aviv West.

TSS: You mean the Hancock village?

BM: No, no, no, no, no. That's South Brookline. Hancock Village is very mixed.

TSS: A lot of Israelis there.

BM: Well, there are a lot of all of those kinds of people, people who are transient, a lot of Japanese, a lot of Chinese.

TSS: Sojourners.

BM: Yes. [to self] What else? [aloud] People became involved in their lives and made friends with them. They see them. They have social contacts with them. There are many of them who are still members of the temple. We live in a mobile society. A lot of them moved away also.

GW: How did this whole experience of traveling to the Soviet Union and working with the Soviet Jewish émigrés once they got to the United States –? How did that change you, if at all?

BM: Look, I'm going to be eighty years old in January. Alright? So I was born during the Second World War. I remember vividly my – among my earliest childhood memories … [phone rings, he answers] [tape resumes] I grew up in a townhouse in New York, which I don't know if you know what the townhouses were built like?

AH: Yeah, I lived there in New York City.

BM: So you know the basements of these four-story houses, and they're straight up?

AH: Yes, very thin (and?) with a walk-in basement.

BM: They're very thin and narrow. Right. When you come in the basement, there's a sitting room behind which is an enormous kitchen. Enormous. I mean, maybe twice the size of this room. Okay? But small sitting room, and then a very large kitchen. Then upstairs is the living room. Maybe a small other room, and then the other two floors were bedrooms. And as a small child, so we're talking about – I was born in 1937. So say when I was five years old, so that would put us where?

GW: '42.

BM: '42. Right in the heart of the war, '42, '43. I was an early riser. I can tell you this; I have a vivid memory of it, that in that kitchen on the sideboard was a large – it was double the size of this square, which was – the bottom part was a radio, and the lid lifted, and you'd put a record on, and you would play your music. I would come down and play my records. I had all these kids' records that I would come down – and my parents had instructed me that when I got up early, that I shouldn't disturb my sisters and not upset the whole household because I get up at five o'clock in the morning. I should go down to the kitchen – My mother always left me a starter breakfast, not full breakfast, but a piece of fruit, something for me to sort of entertain myself – and I should play my music. I can't tell you how many times I came down into that – we called it the parlor floor and basement, the basement part of the parlor floor. How many times I came down in the morning, and there were cots – five, six, eight cots – alongside the edge of the room with people sleeping in them. 1942. When I asked my parents who they were, they said that they had gone to the piers in New York and taken refugees. And they were transitioning them.

TSS: So you grew up into helping.

BM: I grew up with that. Those are my earliest –

AH: It's part of your culture.

BM: It’s part of my –

TSS: Values.

BM: – earliest memory. I remember my mother with eight or nine women around that huge table in that kitchen, baking fruitcakes – I can see it – baking fruitcakes that were put into tins that were sent to soldiers for Thanksgiving and Christmas in the field. That was my household education. So this came very naturally to me, especially given my Jewish commitments. I think [for] a lot of people of my generation, that can be carried over very readily to the struggle for Black rights, voting rights, and so forth. I think all that is part of the same bundle.

GW: Do you guys have any other questions?

AH: I don't think so. I'm actually a bit pressed for time. I apologize.

BM: You do what ever you want, I’m –

AH: But I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us about this.

BM: My pleasure.

TSS: Thank you so much.

GW: Thank you so much. I'm just doing this for technical purposes. We are finishing up our oral history for the Jewish Women's Archive and Brandeis University joint oral history project on the Soviet Jewry Movement with Rabbi Bernard Mehlman on November 1, 2016, at his residence. All right. It's been a great conversation. Thank you very much, Rabbi Mehlman, for your time.

TSS: Thank you so much.

BM: You’re welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]